Antibiotics are medicines that kill bacteria or prevent their growth. They are used for bacterial infections. They do not treat viral or other types of infections.

Antibiotics Come in Many Forms
- Pills
- Oral Suspension
- Inhalers
- Topical Ointments
- Injections
- Through IV

There are several kinds of antibiotics. Some fight off many types of bacteria. These are broad-spectrum ones. Others target specific bacteria. These are narrow-spectrum drugs. If your doctor prescribes one, it works against the bacteria that cause the infection you have.

Some persons think that antibiotics are "cure-all" or "wonder drugs." This is not true. Antibiotics treat only bacterial infections. They do not fight viruses, fungi, or other kinds of germs.

Your doctor will diagnose what kind of infection you have. You should not take antibiotics for viral infections. This could increase the risk for antibiotic resistance. (See Topic 3.)

1. What are Antibiotics?

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1. What are Antibiotics?

2. Do what? Do Antibiotics Treat?

3. What is Antibiotic Resistance?

4. Ways to Prevent Antibiotic Resistance

5. Tips for Taking Antibiotics

The charts on the 3 panels that follow list conditions and when an antibiotic may or may not be needed.

Antibiotics may be prescribed to prevent or reduce the risk for some bacterial infections. This is only for certain reasons.

Examples are:
- To prevent a bacterial infection of the valves of the heart. An antibiotic may be prescribed for persons with certain heart conditions who are having dental work.
- To reduce the risk of bacterial infections that comes with some surgeries. Antibiotics may be given before and after the surgery.

For the most part, though antibiotics should not be taken for viral or fungal infections. Do not take antibiotics for an antibiotic for these reasons:
- To prevent getting colds.
- To prevent getting the flu.
- To prevent getting another infection when you have a cold or the flu. You may have asked your doctor for an antibiotic in the past for this. Don’t do it anymore.
- To prevent getting anthrax. The American Medical Association has advised doctors not to prescribe antibiotics to prevent anthrax or to have them on hand “just in case.” Antibiotics do not prevent anthrax and you should not take them if you are exposed to it.
- To prevent getting smallpox. A virus causes this. You may have taken an antibiotic to treat it.

Taking antibiotics when you don’t need them leads to antibiotic resistance.

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Your doctor will diagnose what kind of infection you have. You should not take antibiotics for viral infections. This could increase the risk for antibiotic resistance. (See Topic 3.)
Some bacteria, which were once fought off by an antibiotic, have become stronger than the medicine. The antibiotic no longer works against them. This is called “antibiotic resistance.” The bacteria “resist” or don’t let the antibiotic do its job.

Antibiotics are given to animals that humans eat. Antibiotic resistance is spread from animals. Individuals can’t catch antibiotic resistance from eating raw and undercooked eggs, meats, fish, and shellfish. Antibiotics are also sprayed on fruit trees. People may pick up resistant bacteria on fruit if it’s not washed before eaten.

• Antibiotics are added to many cleaning and other products. These include dishwashing soaps, and liquid laundry detergents. This is not good! People are using antibiotics in healthy households. Frugality of use of these products makes no sense.

• The biggest misuse is taking antibiotics for viral infections, such as colds and the flu. Antibiotics don’t work. If you have a cold or the flu, take OTC medicines. Don’t skip doses. Ask how the medicine is worked against them.

Don’t take leftover antibiotics from a past infection. This can make it hard to treat a future infection.

Don’t give antibiotics for a cold, the flu, or other viral illnesses. The fewer antibiotics you use, the less chance you will have of developing resistant bacteria.

If your infection does not respond to an antibiotic, ask your doctor what you can do to feel better sooner. You may be told to take another antibiotic to relieve these symptoms. These may include fever, diarrhea, and abdominal cramps. A bronchodilator may be prescribed for bronchitis. Ask about herbal medicines that might be helpful and safe for you to try. Make sure you understand the reasons you should see a doctor again.

Don’t take a prescribed antibiotic as directed. Take the right dose. Use a medicine spoon (for liquid medicines). Don’t skip doses. Ask how you should take the medicine. Ask how many will be left. With food? Between meals? With water? Read the directions on the label. Read the directions on the label.

Don’t stop taking an antibiotic if you feel better. Finish all of it. Don’t save pills for a future infection. Throw away if you vomit after taking an antibiotic. Ask about herbal medicines that might be helpful and safe for you to try.

You may need to see your doctor again. Make sure you understand the reasons you should see a doctor again.

Don’t ask your doctor to prescribe an antibiotic. Don’t ask your doctor if a shorter dose will do. Ask your doctor what you can do to feel better sooner. You may be told to take another antibiotic to relieve these symptoms. These may include fever, diarrhea, and abdominal cramps. A bronchodilator may be prescribed for bronchitis. Ask about herbal medicines that might be helpful and safe for you to try. Make sure you understand the reasons you should see a doctor again.

When you care for a person with an infection or after you use the bathroom, remove possible sources of infection. Wash your hands thoroughly with antibacterial soap.

Signs of a Severe Allergic Reaction

• Trouble breathing or swallowing
• Severe swelling all over, or of the face, lips, tongue, or throat
• Increase in heart rate, dizziness, weakness
• Weakness
• Pale or dusky skin
• Fast or shallow breathing
• Feeling very cold
• Low blood pressure
• Loss of consciousness

Don’t take someone else’s antibiotic. Stay Healthy to Reduce the Need for Antibiotics

• Wash your hands often. Wash them thoroughly with regular soap and water for at least 20 seconds. Wash them after you touch your nose, before you eat, after you use the bathroom, and after you touch animals or their food, waste, or other items.

• Use antibacterial soaps, detergents, mouthwashes, and toys with an antibacterial coating, such as triclosan. Ask your doctor if a shorter dose will do. Ask your doctor what you can do to feel better sooner. You may be told to take another antibiotic to relieve these symptoms. These may include fever, diarrhea, and abdominal cramps. A bronchodilator may be prescribed for bronchitis. Ask about herbal medicines that might be helpful and safe for you to try. Make sure you understand the reasons you should see a doctor again.

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If you have an illness that does not respond to an antibiotic, ask your doctor what you can do to feel better sooner. You may be told to take another antibiotic to relieve these symptoms. These may include fever, diarrhea, and abdominal cramps. A bronchodilator may be prescribed for bronchitis. Ask about herbal medicines that might be helpful and safe for you to try. Make sure you understand the reasons you should see a doctor again.

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